

THE PLACE OF THE ANECDOTE IN PULPIT DISCOURSE.

Z. GRENELL.

Years ago a little fellow who had the run of a minister's library would be found at times lying on the floor of the room, stomach down, his hands supporting his head, while between his elbows on the carpet one of two books lay open—Fox's Book of Martyr's, or Irvine's Cyclopaedia of Anecdotes. The book of martyrs was a gloomy and even heart-rending work, but it had the weird fascination of the most dreadful pictures. The book of anecdotes was innocent of woodcuts, but it was bright and its articles brief. So the two volumes were a capital foil to each other, answering to the tragic or cheerful mood of the young reader. But both books were glorified and their contents made real to the boy when, on a Sunday, the minister who owned them introduced into his sermons illustrations drawn from their narratives. Then appropriate action accompanied the rendering of the story, and proper emphasis, oratorical glow, and now and then a bit of impersonation on the part of the preacher so vivified it, that the boy often thought he had not read the story aright. For he had not attained to that age and spirit, so often exhibited when a story not quite fresh is repeated, when the remark is made with a *blase* air, "Oh dear, I've heard that before!" He welcomed the anecdote even though he knew it by heart for the sake of the ingenious application of it, and he admired the skill that seemed akin to magic, which translated the words in the book into a transaction in real life.

The child's liking for stories is natural and wholesome; and parents and teachers have learned how to turn it to good account in imparting knowledge and inculcating moral principles. And it stays with him. However richly his mind becomes furnished, whatever direction culture may give to his tastes he never changes so much as not to relish an opposite story well told. As to how far the preacher of the Gospel should cater to that liking is a question worthy of consideration. That the successful evangelist relies largely upon his stock of stories to hold the attention and touch the sensibilities and impress truth, is manifest. But it is thought by many preachers that the anecdote is an undignified concession to a childish taste, that it is near neighbor to the frivolous, that it lacks the solid, grave and weighty character that is suited to earnest and persuasive discourse. That illustrations are valuable nobody disputes, but the kind of illustration that comes out in the form of anecdote is by them tabooed.

"I never tell stories in the pulpit," they say.

That there should be a quiet revolt against the use of the anecdote in the pulpit, not only among some of our thoughtful preachers but also on the part of many of our judicious laymen, is natural, when we consider how flagrantly many an audience has been abused or trifled with in the use of this form of discourse. How often have we been compelled to listen to a gray-haired anecdote whose decrepitude was made all the more conspicuous by the manner of telling it! If a corpse is to be resurrected, it should at least be endowed with life. In how many cases have we seen the anecdote introduced simply for purposes of entertainment, creating a smile but having only a forced connection with the subject under discussion or none at all! And has not our good nature been imposed upon by the goody-goody story without the least approach to the merit of freshness, and showing no least virtue of invention, such a story as may be concocted off-hand by the yard, with flat dialogue and juvenile moralizings? We have listened with indescribable feelings to this sort of thing: "A little Sunday-school girl said to her godless father, 'Pa, why don't you love God?' And the father answered, 'I don't know.' and the little one asked, 'Why don't you know, pa?' And the father said to himself, as he went about his business, 'Why don't I know? Why don't I know?' and the next Sunday he was baptized; and when he told the congregation how his little daughter's question had set him to thinking, there was not a dry eye in the house. 'Well,' said the prophet, 'A little child shall lead them.'" And we have not known whether to be more astonished at the *non sequitur* in the story or at the preacher's bold misuse of the prophet's words.

One reason for the disgrace into which the pulpit anecdote has fallen is to be found in the fact that it is so often made too diffuse in the narration. Many a preacher who carefully prepares the rest of his discourse leaves the stories to be framed *ex tempore*, and the result is a halting, unprogressive style of talk, trying to lead up the point, which point the hearer anticipates and waits for with impatience. In his college days the writer was possessed of a legible penmanship that sometimes secured for him employment as copyist. Shortly before a certain vacation one of the professors who had an engagement to preach somewhere brought him a couple of sermons to be copied for pulpit use. It was noticeable in the professor's manuscript that while all else of the sermon was written out to

the last syllable, the anecdotal illustrations were simply indicated by a reminding expression in a parenthesis. For example, in speaking of the sustaining power of faith in the midst of life's trials, this would be inserted, ("Here expand the poor widow.") Those who had heard the professor preach might have known, had they seen his manuscript, how it occurred that his stories were the weakest part of his discourses. He "expanded" his poor widows altogether too much.

But the misuse of a good thing is not a sufficient reason for the rejection of the thing itself, else sermons must go out as well as anecdotes. The most successful preachers have dealt liberally in illustrations, and among the illustrations the anecdote has had a fair measure of place. Probably the late Charles Spurgeon easily stood first among preachers who found and filled the ears of the masses. His use of the anecdote is worth studying. On the single occasion when the writer heard him, he introduced three such illustrations in his one discourse, and the last and most effective one was the most familiar, namely, the incident in the life of Lady Anne Erskine which led to her conversion. She drove up in her carriage and sat listening to Rowland Hill as he was preaching to an out-of-door congregation. Mr. Hill singled her out, knowing her as a lady of fashion, and represented an auction sale as going on for the soul of Lady Erskine, with the world, the devil and the Lord Jesus as bidders, bringing out most distinctly the offer of Christ to give himself for her. The story was aptly told, pithily told, and it produced a perceptible impression on the tabernacle audience. If you would tell a story, learn to tell it well.

But the best example of all is that of the divine Preacher. "Without a parable spake he not unto them." His parables were almost always short stories, invented for the occasion and the subject, told without the least redundancy of language, and moving directly and almost abruptly to the point. They won the most absorbed attention of the multitudes, shed clearest light upon the truth for those who wished to know the truth, and have left a fund of instruction and a model of method for all who would preach the Word with effect.

Chicago, Ill.

—The Russian Red Cross Society has sent an expedition of ten doctors and eighty nurses to Abyssinia to help take care of the Abyssinians wounded. Money has been coming in, donors in many cases stipulating that it "shall be devoted exclusively to the service of the Abyssinians, not a kopek for the relief of the Italians.